

Frequently Asked Questions about Genital Herpes

What is genital herpes?

Genital herpes is a very common sexually transmitted disease (STD) caused by herpes simplex viruses type 1 (HSV-1) or type 2 (HSV-2). Most genital herpes is caused by HSV-2. Most individuals do not have symptoms, or have very mild symptoms, from HSV-1 or HSV-2 infection.

How common is genital herpes?

Genital HSV-2 infection is one of the most common STDs. Approximately one out of five women and one out of nine men 14 to 49 years of age is infected. Genital herpes is more likely to be passed from an infected male to a female partner than from an infected female to a male partner.

How do people get genital herpes?

Generally, HSV-2 is passed during oral, anal or vaginal sex. HSV can be spread from an infected partner who does not have a visible sore and may not know that he or she is infected.

HSV-1 more commonly causes infections of the mouth and lips ("fever blisters" or "cold sores") but can also cause genital herpes. HSV-1 infection can be passed through oral, anal, or vaginal sex. Genital HSV-1 outbreaks recur less regularly than genital HSV-2 outbreaks.

What are the signs and symptoms of genital herpes?

Most individuals with HSV-2 infection do not know they are infected because they do not have symptoms or their symptoms are so mild that they do not notice them. Some people also mistake mild symptoms for insect bites, scratches, or another skin condition. If "typical" symptoms do occur, these usually occur within two weeks after exposure and may include painful sores on the genitals or anus and/or flu-like symptoms (fever and swollen glands). Sores typically heal within a few weeks. Some people diagnosed with a first episode of genital herpes have several outbreaks within a year. Over time these outbreaks usually occur less frequently and often disappear altogether.

What health risks are associated with genital herpes?

Most of the time, herpes does not cause any significant health problems and is no more than an inconvenient skin condition. Rarely, herpes can cause severe health problems in people with suppressed immune systems.

Infection from a woman to her baby is rare. However, if a pregnant woman passes herpes to her baby during vaginal delivery, this can lead to potentially fatal infections in infants. Caesarean sections (c-sections) are usually performed if there is a possibility of an active herpes outbreak in the mother at the time of birth.

An active herpes outbreak can increase a person's risk for becoming infected with HIV if exposed to the virus. People with herpes and HIV may also be more likely to pass HIV to sex partners during active outbreaks.

People who know they are infected with herpes often experience emotional and psychological distress due to the stigma of having a life-long STD.

How does genital herpes affect pregnant women?

Although mother-to-baby HSV infection is rare, genital HSV can lead to potentially fatal infections in infants. Newly acquired infection during late pregnancy increases the risk of passing HSV to a baby during childbirth. If a woman has active genital herpes at delivery, a cesarean delivery is usually performed to avoid this risk.

How is genital herpes diagnosed?

If sores are present, a health care providers can diagnose genital herpes through a visual examination and by taking a sample from a sore for testing in a laboratory. Blood tests to detect antibodies to HSV-1 and HSV-2 can also be used if active symptoms are not present. Not all blood tests are "type specific", that is, are able to tell which type of HSV a person has.

How is genital herpes treated?

There is no treatment that can cure herpes, but antiviral medications can prevent outbreaks or reduce their frequency and severity (how strong symptoms are). In many cases, over time the body's own immune system suppresses the virus and outbreaks become less frequent or stop altogether. The risk of passing HSV between outbreaks is low, but there may be brief periods of time when viral shedding occurs without symptoms. Daily medication can reduce viral shedding and significantly lower the chance of passing HSV to sexual partners.

How can genital herpes be prevented?

The surest way to avoid getting or passing STDs is to abstain from any sexual contact, including oral, anal and vaginal sex. Other ways to lower the risk of getting or passing STDs include being in a long-term mutually monogamous relationship with a partner who has been tested and is known to be uninfected, and using latex or polyurethane condoms correctly from the beginning to the end of every sex act.

Genital herpes symptoms can occur in genital and anal areas that are covered or protected by a condom, as well as in areas that are not covered or protected. Correct and consistent use of latex or polyurethane condoms can reduce the risk of getting or passing genital herpes. Taking daily suppressive medication also lowers the risk of passing the infection to sexual partners.

Avoiding sexual activity when sores or other symptoms are present can reduce the risk of passing herpes. However, there is still a chance that sex partners may become infected even when symptoms are not present. Sex partners of infected persons should be made aware of the possibility of becoming infected themselves. Sex partners can seek testing to determine if they are infected with HSV. A positive HSV-2 blood test most likely indicates a genital herpes infection.

Where can I get more information?

- Your healthcare provider
- New Jersey Department of Health website: www.nj.gov/health
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website: www.cdc.gov/std/herpes/
- CDC-INFO Contact Center at:
English and Spanish
(800) CDC-INFO
(800) 232-4636
TTY: (888) 232-6348

• This information is intended for educational purposes only and is not intended to replace consultation with a healthcare professional. Adapted from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.